

Early Fairbury Harness Makers

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The Thomas Mapel family moved from West Virginia to Potosi Corners, south of Fairbury. In 1869, the family with four children moved to Fairbury. Sons John and Nimrod started farming together in the Fairbury area.

John Mapel married Elizabeth Syphers. Nimrod Mapel married Margaret Moran. In 1880, the two brothers invested \$350 in a harness business. Unfortunately, their new business burned down just two weeks after they started it. They resumed their harness business, but in 1884, their business burned a second time. In 1890, they decided to build their own spacious brick building on the north side of Locust Street, between Second and Third Streets. Today, this building is occupied by the Once 'n Again business.

The new spacious building allowed the Mapel brothers to expand into hardware, implements, wagons, and buggies. Their core business was a top-notch, hand-made harness department.

Buggies were ordered by the carload, and the upstairs was full of an excellent variety for purchase. In 1906, W. J. Bethard purchased the first automobile in Fairbury, and the writing was on the wall for the decline of the horse buggy, but the Mapel Brothers business success continued. For example, in 1929, they sold 18,000 pairs of gloves. Horses continued to be used on Fairbury area farms into the 1940s. Today, there are still several old wood wagons with the name Mapel Bros. stenciled on the side of the wagons.

The Mapel Brothers Harness Shop building was a popular place for retired farmers to gather and socialize. In the cold winter months, the retired farmers would gather around a pot-bellied stove inside the building. When the weather got warm, they would set in chairs outside the building. An old photograph circa 1900 shows fifteen of the harness shop "Council" setting in chairs outside the building.

John Mapel died in 1923 at the age of 73. He was buried in Fairbury's Graceland Cemetery. At this point, the Mapel brothers had been in business together for 43 years. Nimrod decided to continue their business with his daughter Frances Lindsay as their bookkeeper.

Nimrod's health began to fail in 1932, so daughter Frances Lindsay took over the business. In 1935, Nimrod died at the age of 78. He was interred in the mausoleum at Graceland Cemetery.

After Nimrod died, a duckpin bowling alley was opened in the Mapel building. It was managed by James B. Packard of Charleston. He was part of a business group that operated a chain of twenty-two bowling alleys in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. In duckpin

bowling, the pins are shorter and fatter than regular bowling pins. The balls are also smaller without any finger holes. This bowling alley only lasted five months, before it was removed and installed in Rantoul.

Frances Lindsay continued the harness business until her own husband Edward died in 1950. At that time, the Mapel Brothers' harness business was one of the last establishments in the country where hand-made harnesses were still made.

In 1950, Frances Lindsay sold the Mapel Brothers building to Joe Zimmerman, who opened a hardware store which operated for many decades.

Besides a few old Mapel Bros. wagons in the area, the only other reminder of this iconic harness business is the horse mannequin. The Mapel brothers bought this full-size horse mannequin in 1890 to display their custom harnesses. For six decades, it proudly stood in their storefront window on Locust Street. When the business finally closed in 1950, Frances Lindsay saved the mannequin and stored it. For the next half-century, various Fairbury area people stored it and refurbished it.

The Pontiac car company actually got its start making horse-drawn buggies. The Pontiac Oakland Museum in Pontiac, Illinois, had a circa 1890 Pontiac horse-drawn buggy in its collection. The 1890 Mapel Brothers horse mannequin was donated to this museum, and the horse and buggy are on display today. If you get a chance, stop in at this museum and see this proud reminder of the Mapel brothers sixty years of business in Fairbury.



Restored Mapel Brothers Horse in Pontiac-Oakland Car museum in Pontiac, Illinois